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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the model that proposes that significant others affect self-concept of academic ability which affects achievement. The statistical method used was path analysis. The population studied consisted of low-achieving black students. The model was not substantiated for students who had negative (defensive) attitudes towards school. Defensive attitudes appear to help protect self-concept which was found to be disproportionate to and unaffecting of achievement. The model, however, was substantiated for students with positive (non-defensive) attitudes towards school: significant others were found to affect self-concept of ability which in turn affected achievement. (Author)

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SIGNIFICANT OTHERS, SELF-CONCEPT OF ABILITY, AND ACHIEVEMENT

A. Objectives

Although the topic of significant other, self-concept of ability and achievement has received much attention in the last decade, there is nevertheless a lack of consistency in the findings. Studies have reported relationships between perceptions of significant others, self-concept of ability and achievement for white students (although there has been no clear satisfactory attempt to investigate cause). Such students, however, do not constitute the total student population. Studies dealing with perceptions of significant others' evaluations, self-concept of ability and achievement with black students have been less consistent in their findings: the model of significant others - affects - SCAA - affects achievement does not hold. The major objective of this study then was to discern what could account for this model not holding for black students.

This research concerned an investigation into the relationship between low-achieving, black students' perceptions of significant others' (teacher and parents) academic evaluations of them and their own self-concepts of academic ability. The problem concerned also an investigation into the effect of perceptions of significant others' evaluations on self-concept and achievement. Attitude (seen as a defensive maneuvering of the self-system) toward school was measured to see if this would affect the functioning of the model.

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B. Perspectives

The terms "self" and "self-concept" have been used in many different ways and contexts. For the purpose of this study, self-concept referred to the individual as known to the individual, or the individual as thought of by the individual. It is furthermore recognized that there are several distinct components of the self, the self being thought of as multidimensional. The present study was concerned with one such facet of the global self-concept: the self-concept of academic ability (SCAA). In addition, this SCAA can be further subdivided into a general SCAA (the student's perception of his general academic ability) and a specific SCAA (the student's perception of his ability in a particular subject or academic area).

According to Sullivan (1953) the concept of self develops from the individual's view of "significant others" perceptions of him.

Previous studies, including those done by Brookover (1962), have found that the way an individual evaluates himself on a certain criterion will affect his performance or behavior in a related area.

In attempting to understand the theory that significant others affect self-concept which affects performance, Sullivan's theory of the function of the self is relevant. Sullivan maintains that one of the individual's greatest needs is the need for security. He views the self-system as a buffer for warding off anxiety which arouses feelings of insecurity. The self-system's defenses serve this protective function. Attitudes, according to Katz (1967), serve the needs of the personality and can be viewed as defensive in nature. In order to protect

oneself against anxiety and in an attempt to see oneself in as favorable a light as possible, ego-defensive attitudes can be employed. Returning then to the school situation, it was thought that the student's attitude towards school would shed some light on the model which proposes that perceptions of significant others affect self-concept which affects achievement. It was thought that if a student had had many negative experiences in school, experiences which were painful to his self-esteem and were anxiety producing, he may have developed a defensive attitude towards school as a way of protecting himself. Such a student may have the defensive attitude that school is unimportant (he does not "stake" himself on being a student and hence does not lose face if he does poorly). Students who have such attitudes, it could be speculated, are the students whose self-systems feel vulnerable to attack with regard to academic evaluation. Weakened by feelings of vulnerability these students then fiercely defend themselves. The teacher and her evaluations would then also be defensively dealt with in an attempt to protect self-esteem. This would result in a defensive self-concept of ability which would have little relationship to achievement.

C. Methods

Students entering a special school in the fall of 1973 were tested. Testing was done at three points in time over a five-month period. Reliability and validity had previously been established on all tests used.

At the beginning of the fall quarter newly enrolled eighth grade students were given the following paper and pencil tests:

1. a School Attitude Scale -- to determine the student's attitude towards school (Lewis, 1973);
2. the Self-Concept of Academic Ability Scales -- to determine a student's general and specific concept of his ability (Brookover, 1962; Lewis, 1973);
3. the Perceived Teacher Evaluation Scales -- to determine a student's perceptions of his teacher's academic evaluations of his ability (Brookover, 1962; Lewis, 1973);
4. the Perceived Parent Evaluation Scales -- to determine a student's perceptions of his parents' academic evaluation of his ability (Brookover, 1972; Lewis, 1973); and
5. the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Reading Comprehension) -- to determine reading ability.

Ten weeks later (and after their first report cards had been received) students were re-tested. Ten weeks later and after receiving their second report cards they were tested for the final time.

Pearson Product Moment correlations were computed to determine the following:

1. the relationship between the general SCAA's and the specific SCAA's;
2. the relationship between perceived evaluations of teacher and parents;
3. the relationship between a student's SCAA and his perception of his significant other's evaluation of him; and
4. the relationship between grades received and the student's perception of his teacher's academic evaluation of him.

To test the model that perceptions of significant others' evaluations affect self-concept of ability which affects achievement, the statistical tool of path analysis was used. This also determined the effect of attitude towards school on the above model.

D. Data Source

The sample comprised of newly enrolled eighth grade students, entering a school which serves pupils who are not achieving at grade level particularly as regards the subject of reading. Eighty-seven percent of the students were black, eleven percent Spanish American, two percent white. Of the sixty-four students entering the school in the fall of 1973, thirty-eight were male, and twenty-six female. The students all had the same teachers although they were in different classrooms.

E. Results

Significant positive correlations were found between a student's general SCAA and his specific SCAA (in the subject of reading); between perceived evaluations of teacher and parents; between his perception of himself as a student and his perception of his significant others' (parents' ~~or~~ and teacher's) evaluation of him as a student; between the grades a student received and his perception of his teacher's evaluation of him.

Path analyses indicated that whilst perceived evaluations did affect a student's evaluation of himself over time, his own specific SCAA did not affect his reading achievement. The model, as anticipated, was not substantiated for the total

population. However, when students were divided according to attitude towards school (positive versus negative) the model did function for students with positive attitudes towards school; the model was not, however, substantiated for students with poor attitudes towards school (their specific SCAA did not affect their reading achievement). It appears that these students' self-concepts are not realistic but rather are defensive in nature and therefore are disproportionate to their achievements.

The individual, according to Horney (1950), Rosenberg (1971) and others, will always attempt to see himself in as favorable a light as possible in this way protecting his feelings of self-worth. Should a student feel his self-esteem is threatened by school experiences he will attempt to protect himself by adopting certain attitudes. By taking a negative attitude towards school a student can protect his self-esteem: he can maintain that he is a good student, even if this is false, rationalizing that he does not achieve not because he lacks ability but rather because he is not interested enough to even try -- with no attempt there can be no failure, and with no failure no humiliation.

Students with negative attitudes towards school were found for the most part to consider themselves at least average with regard to academic ability. Self-esteem was then not damaged. This suggests that attitude towards school served a protective function for such students. The findings then suggest that self-concept will affect achievement only when the self-concept is a somewhat non-defensive one, when it is a fairly realistic self-concept given the standards of the group against which the student or individual is comparing or evaluating himself.

Attitude toward school was thus found to be a valuable variable in the understanding of the model which proposes that perceptions of significant others' evaluations affect self-concept of ability which affects achievement for the population of students studied in this research.

F. Educational Significance

The findings imply the responsibility both teachers and parents have in promoting healthy self-image in students.

The results of this study suggest that the attitude toward school is an important variable in affecting the self-concept achievement model. Since attitudes change when they are no longer necessary to the individual, the implication is an encouraging one. Given a sympathetic and encouraging school environment attitudes toward school can be enabled to change.